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ABSTRACT

Adolescent suicide is an important problem. Given ethical considerations, it is difficult to obtain data regarding the suicidal thinking of "normal" adolescents. To collect data concerning suicidal thinking without directly introducing the topic of suicide, 217 tenth through twelfth graders, divided equally according to sex, grade, and urban versus rural residence, recorded three responses they felt a character in an adverse life circumstance would be thinking about doing. Next, they were asked if they had ever thought about or done any of their three projected responses. Results showed that 60 percent of the subjects projected suicide onto the character. Of those projecting suicide, 55 percent indicated they had personally thought about suicide. Of the 130 subjects who projected suicide, 7 reported engaging in suicidal behaviors. Twice as many females as males projected suicide, suggesting that females were less reluctant to report suicidal thinking. Common circumstances associated with suicidal thinking were emotional problems (i.e., depression), and family, or peer problems. Suicidal thoughts occurred most often in grades 7 through 9, with a drop in frequency thereafter. Racial differences and modifications in scenarios designed to increase the subjects' identification with the characters in them might be considerations in future research. (Author/BH)

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Adolescent Suicidal Thinking[1]

Presented in the Sixth Annual Graduate Student Research Competition at

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Abstract

Adolescent suicide is an important problem. Given ethical considerations, it is difficult to obtain data regarding the suicidal thinking of "normal" adolescents. This study allowed us to collect data concerning suicidal thinking without directly introducing the topic of suicide. Two-hundred and seventeen tenth through twelfth graders served as subjects. They were approximately equally divided according to sex, grade, and urban versus rural residence. Each subject recorded three responses they felt a character in an adverse life circumstance would be thinking about doing. Next, they were asked if they had ever thought about or done any of their three projected responses. Sixty percent of the subjects projected suicide onto the character. Of those projecting suicide, fifty-five percent indicated they had personally thought about suicide. Of the 130 subjects who projected suicide, seven reported engaging in suicidal behaviors. Statistical and qualitative analyses revealed a number of other findings of importance.

Adolescent Suicidal Thinking

Large increases in adolescent suicide rates are currently being reported in the field of Suicidology and elsewhere (Bailey, 1984; Frederick and Lague, 1978; Getz, Allen, Meyers and Lindner, 1983). Actually these increases are a double problem because the variety of the adolescents' backgrounds has widened in addition to the increases in their suicide rates. Human services providers have long recognized that individuals differ not only clinically but by demographic and geographic characteristics as well, and that appropriate interventions must take these differences into account.

Although some improvements of screening, assessment and intervention procedures have been made (Fish and Waldhart-Letzel, 1981; Peck, 1982), many of these procedures are still based on heuristics generated from broad research findings and clinical experience with psychiatric and "crisis" clients. The validity of these procedures may therefore be lacking when they are used with suicidal adolescents from otherwise "normal" backgrounds, especially when those backgrounds involve demographic or social groups with which the professional is unfamiliar. It seems that each day a new problem such as that of child abuse might be touted as "the leading cause of adolescent suicide", but the question

"for what adolescent group?" would always remain and cases of unabused adolescents who committed suicide would be reported thus increasing the confusion.

Additionally, some adolescents with no obvious reasons to desire their own deaths actively or passively end their lives in a sudden manner, to the surprise of all concerend. This apparent suddenness is usually the combined result of inadequate information among those acquainted with the suicidal person and that person's tendency to verbally deny that he or she has a problem, even while making nonverbal suggestions to the contrary. General heuristics cannot transcend these problems, and the hodgepodge of alledgedly important variables they introduce into consideration is of little value in dealing with a given suicidal adolescent or a problem unique to his/her community.

This study was concieved not to produce generalities but to demonstrate how more useful knowledge may be gained by the study of the suicidal thoughts and behaviors of specific groups of adolescents who are functioning at more or less acceptable levels in society. To achieve this end the students at an urban high school and a rural high school were each given a survey which, although it never specifically mentioned suicide, allowed them to spontaneously project that and other

responses onto a fictitious character who was experiencing difficult life circumstances. The students were asked to list three things the character might be thinking about doing on page one of the survey, and then to report whether they had thought about or done each of the things they projected onto the character on the following pages. They were also given space and asked to briefly describe the circumstances surrounding their thoughts/ behaviors.

This indirect methodology allowed us to inquire about suicidal thinking and behavior while avoiding some of the ethical complications related to possibilities of increasing the students' actual suicide risk by such an inquiry-the students themselves chose to introduce and discuss the responses they projected. Of equal advantage in this situation is that the responses reflect that those groups and individuals felt was important. For this reason their responses may yield knowledge about students in specific groups which might not be evident otherwise, such as the relative importance of family, school and social pressures acting on them.

Therefore this research is not intended to promote any one empirical assessment procedure for adolescent suicide risk, but rather to demonstrate how information

about groups of normal adolescents may be gathered unobtrusively. With this information human services providers may become sensitized to the special concerns of adolescents in their local areas. This can help the providers to reduce suicide fatalities by improving clinical services and also by focusing on problems unique to their areas as targets for social action.

Method

Subjects

The subject population consisted of two-hundred and seventeen adolescents. Two independent samples were available for analysis. The first sample was composed of 119 students (grades 10-12) from an urban high school in Houston, Texas, and the second sample was made up of 98 students (grades 10-12) from a rural high school in Lufkin, Texas. Subjects in the samples were equally likely to recieve a given scenario, and they were approximately equally distributed by sex, grade and urban versus rural residence.

Procedure

All subjects were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and then the surveys were distributed. The first page of the surveys contained blanks for the students to record their sex, age, race, grade and school. These were followed

by one of eighteen different scenarios portraying a fictitious character who was experiencing adverse life circumstances. The scenarios varied by the age (same, teen, elderly), sex and circumstances of the character they described. Following the scenario the subject was asked "what are three things (Sue/Rich/Mrs. Johnson) might be thinking about doing?". This procedure provided data on projected suicidal ideation in the same manner as that employed by Bailey (1982, 1984). The second and third pages consisted of a follow-up to the above methodology which was designed to extend our knowledge of the responses projected, especially suicidal ideation. In the follow-up subjects were asked if they had ever attempted or thought of attempting any of the responses they projected onto the scenario characters. The subjects were also asked to list the age(s) and briefly describe the circumstances of any such thoughts or attempts.

Results

Sixty percent of the subjects projected suicidal ideation onto the scenario character. The overall grade comparison on this variable achieved only borderline significance ($X^2(2, N=217=5.14, p<.10)$. Subjects projected suicide at approximately the same rates by sex and school. Racial comparisons were

considered to be inappropriate due to the small sample sizes obtained from some groups. Of the 130 subjects who projected suicide, 25% projected two additional ineffective responses, 8% projected two effective responses and 66% projected one of each.

Fifty-five percent of the suicide projectors reported that they had personally thought about suicide, and seven of these people reported that they had attempted it. The school and grade comparisons were nonsignificant, but the sex comparisons achieved significance ($X^2(1,N-130)=10.64$, $p<.01$). Females who projected suicide and reported personal suicidal thoughts outnumbered males who did so two to one. The most commonly reported general and specific circumstances surrounding suicidal thoughts were those classified as personal-emotional, and the most common of them was depression. Subjects reported thinking about suicide most often when they were in grades 7-9 (22%), but this is an underestimate because 12% listed multiple grades and were categorized separately.

Discussion

The results obtained from analysis of the projected suicide data are consistent with those from past studies (Bailey, 1984). The suicide projection rate for any given group of high school students seems to hover around 60%. Students who projected suicide also tended

to project additional ineffective responses onto the scenario characters. It appears that students who view a person in troubled circumstances as considering suicide feel that the character will select other ineffective coping strategies as well.

The fact that escape was the most ineffective response projected (other than suicide) is not surprising either, as suicide itself may be viewed as a special and permanent type of escape (Getz, Allen, Meyers and Lindner, 1983, p. 9). The effective response most often projected was appealing to help from friends - obviously adolescents rely heavily on their boy or girlfriends as well as others in their peer groups.

More than half (55%) of the people who projected suicide reported personally considering it on the follow-up survey, and seven people reported personal suicide attempts. Thus, although those who projected did not unanamously report considering it, the scenarios provided an entree for the subject's discussion of their own suicidal thoughts and behaviors which were inititated voluntarily.

Several comparisons between subejct groups on personal suicidal thinking were conducted, however only the sex comparison was significant. Twice as many females reported considering suicide, a finding

consistent with their known (Rathus and Nevid, 1980) differential attempt rates. This suggests that females were less reluctant to report their personal suicidal thinking. Such a small sample of suicidal behavior was obtained (7 cases) that it was deemed inappropriate to compare groups on this variable, however five of the cases were reported by males, and the cases were almost equally divided among grades. Six of the cases of suicide projectors who reported personally attempting suicide involved multiple attempts, and the majority of attempters reported frequently considering suicide as well.

The most common general circumstances associated with suicidal thinking were personal/emotional problems, followed by family and peer/mate problems. The most often reported specific personal problem was depression, a finding consistent with suicide literature yet contrasting with the typically low (10% in this study) rates at which depression is projected onto scenario characters. Apparently the subjects' own suicidal projections elicit depressive feelings more readily than the predicaments of the scenario characters. Also consistent with past studies is some leveling of projected suicide in upper grades after increases in the middle ones. The lower and middle grades were not

directly surveyed here, but the students reported that their past suicidal thoughts occurred most often in grades 7 through 9 and reports dropped in frequency thereafter. This drop in reported suicide as opposed to the leveling of projected suicide may occur as older subjects become aware of and consider more effective alternative to their own problems.

Obviously this methodology produced a wealth of information about these students' suicidal thinking, however some refinements will always be possible. Suggested variables for future study include racial differences in projected and reported suicidal thinking, and modifications of scenarios designed to increase the subjects' identification with the characters in them. Also, future subjects who do not project suicide might be given direct suicide surveys in order to compare them with suicide projectors on the responses of suicide and depression.

Footnotes

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